



THE STORY OF CANNIBAL MARY

The story of Mary's cannibalism occurs in Book 6, right at the climax of Josephus' account of the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., and it serves dramatically as the catalyst for the destruction of the Jewish Temple. In the story it is Passover, the time when Jews come together to eat the **Passover Lamb**. What makes this speech remarkable, is that it comes directly from the mouth of a woman; it is more unusual still in that it is addressed to a baby. On the practical level within the story, the baby will serve as "food" to alleviate the mother's hunger. On the thematic level, the baby will play the tragic role of a "Fury" after its death (like those in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*), hounding the rebels for the crimes they have committed. Finally, the label of "myth" elevates the baby to a role in a tragedy.

Josephus, Jewish Wars of the Jews (6. 199-219)

"There was a certain woman that dwelt beyond Jordan, her name was Mary; her father was **Eleazar**, of the village Betheszob, which signifies the *house of Hyssop*. She was eminent for her family and her wealth, and had fled away to Jerusalem with the rest of the multitude, and was with them besieged therein at this time. The other effects of this woman had been already seized upon, such I mean as she had brought with her out of Perea, and removed to the city. What she had treasured up besides, as also what food she had contrived to save, had been also carried off by the rapacious guards, who came every day running into her house for that purpose. This put the poor woman into a very great passion, and by the frequent reproaches and imprecations she cast at these rapacious villains, she had provoked them to anger against her; but none of them, either out of the indignation she had raised against herself, or out of commiseration of her case, would take away her life; and if she found any food, she perceived her labors were for others, and not for herself; and it was now become impossible for her any way to find any more food, while the famine pierced through her very **bowels** and marrow,

when also her passion was fired to a degree beyond the famine itself; nor did she consult with any thing but with her passion and the necessity she was in.

She then attempted a most unnatural thing; and snatching up her son, who was a child sucking at her breast, she said, "O thou miserable infant! for whom shall I preserve thee in this war, this famine, and this sedition? As to the war with the Romans, if they preserve our lives, we must be slaves. This famine also will destroy us, even before that slavery comes upon us. Yet are these seditious rogues more terrible than both the other. Come on; be thou my food, and be thou a **Fury** to these seditious rebels, and a **myth to the world**, which is all that is now wanting to **complete the calamities of us Jews**.

As soon as she had said this, she slew her son, and then roasted him, and ate the one half of him, and kept the other half by her concealed. Upon this the seditious came in presently, and smelling the horrid scent of this food, they threatened her that they would cut her throat immediately if she did not show them what food she had gotten ready. She replied that she had saved a very fine portion of it for them, and withal uncovered what was left of her son. Hereupon they were seized with a horror and amazement of mind, and stood astonished at the sight, when she said to them,

'This child is my own, and the deed is mine. Eat, for I, too, have eaten. Don't be weaker than a woman or more compassionate than a mother. If you are pious and turn away from my sacrifice, then I have eaten for you, and let the left-overs remain for me.'

After which those men went out trembling, being never so much afrighted at any thing as they were at this, and with some difficulty they left the rest of that meat to the mother."

in the passage Josephus described Mary's son as a "mythos" or 'myth for the world' (BJ 6. 207). He goes on to state that the killing of the myth for the world will be seen as a "mysos" (BJ 6, 212) or 'atrocious', that will be responded to by the Romans with "misos" (BJ 6.214) or 'bitter hatred'.

The term for bowels has connotations of being a sacrifice, and the idea of bowels being pierced reappears when Mary's bowels/heart are pierced in the Gospel of Luke in an equivalent text (2;35). Also in Mary's speech the use of "this" with the first person possessive adjective and her invitation to the rebels to eat this child partly resembles the words attributed to Jesus at the Last Supper, a meal timed in the Christian texts with Passover.

These links between the two texts is significant. There is only one individual who can be seen as a 'myth for the world', who was a son of Mary and a human Passover lamb, and whose killing was an 'atrocious' and who served as a Fury creating 'bitter hatred' of the Jews.....namely the figure of Jesus Christ, who is described as dying like a Passover Lamb

sacrifice on the cross, and giving his body and blood to his followers at the Passover celebration. In other words the literary account of this cannibalism in Josephus' *The Roman-Jewish War* was used as the basis for creating the Last Supper, as a literary commemoration of the cannibalism in that war.

Reading

Honora H. Chapman "A Myth for the World": Early Christian Reception of Infanticide and Cannibalism in Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* 6.199-219

Joseph Atwill *Caesar's Messiah* (2005)